

# Letters

I feel that your editor Suzannah Lessard, in her muddled and kind of pathetic way, has done such a disservice not only to my book on SDS but to SDS and the Movement of the 1960s that her article ("The Legacy of SDS," March) should not be allowed to stand without a response.

It is terribly misleading for you to represent this as "The Legacy of SDS," and presumptuous of Lessard to write it, as if she were ever an SDSer herself, or had ever known the inside workings of SDS, or had even been a campus radical. By her own testimony she was a political ignoramus, she was not a part of the civil rights movement (too much sympathy for the Southern whites, it seems), not active in the antiwar campaign, not a member of any campus political group, she was "detached from the university" and "apolitical," and her only experience with SDS was during part of one month at Columbia University in 1968. Her total expertise, one gathers, comes from admittedly "auxiliary" and "lukewarm" participation in two campus actions at that time which, she says, left her in "utter confusion," incapable of a "coherent political stand," and during which she admits getting arrested "as much in defiance of SDS as of the administration." From *this* person we are supposed to get "lines of inquiry into what the New Left meant"?

Moreover, Lessard clearly did not understand then, and does not understand now, what SDS was all about. Part of this is undoubtedly due to her confessed inability to read any of the material that SDS put out—"my eye skidded off the page," she says—a deficiency that in a lesser woman would no doubt have disinclined her from lengthy public criticisms of SDS and its "absurd ideas." But part of it comes from an inability to read *my* material, which, though I admit goes on at some length, has proven to be accessible to virtually everyone else who has given it a try.

For example, she believes that "the assassination of Robert Kennedy gets one line" in the book when in fact it is given nine lines and a 23-line footnote (p. 450). She finds that the book "ignores the impact on SDS of the parallel black movement," apparently missing 16 pages on the civil rights movement, 13 pages on SDS's policies

toward it, 29 references to SNCC, 40 to the Black Panther Party, four to black student organizations, and five pages on SDS debates about the black movement, with specific examples of impact throughout, from page 23 ("the birth of the civil-rights movement. . . gave SDS its initial cause") to page 516 ("the SDS leadership gave particular attention to the Panthers. . ."). She complains that "there is no mention of the fact that during the very first sit-in at Hamilton Hall, the black students in effect kicked the white students out (whereupon they went to Low Library)," obviously having skipped over page 436: "After the whites were kicked out of the occupied building [they] then in some disarray took over Low Library." And so on.

Can we really be expected to rely upon this person and her skidding eyes?

Next, as to Lessard's specific complaints about my book, or what parts of it she may have read. 1) She complains first that it is official history, with all the documents and speeches and committees and strategies "painstakingly documented," and then that it is *not*, that it doesn't tell "what went on within the organization." I don't know which way she wants it, really, but suffice here to say simply that it is not official history and that it does, in voluminous detail, tell what the SDSers were doing, thinking, and saying. 2) She complains that the people I've interviewed haven't been honest and have given me only an idealized version of what went on, thus producing "gilded mythology." Aside from the fact that she herself admittedly hadn't a clue of what happened in SDS at either the national or local levels and is hardly in a position to judge, the fact is that SDSers are full of criticism and all that is fully explored in the book (Lessard might like to read Chapter 23 again, among others). But that is probably not really what she is looking for: she's really saying that she doesn't find in the SDSers in the book that process of self-hatred, lost conviction, tortured doubt and slide-to-liberalism that she herself went through. All I can say is, I'm sorry. For her. 3) She complains that the book doesn't deal with the real world outside of SDS. But of course she has, as we've seen, skipped over the references both to Bobby Kennedy and the Black movement, so her testimony here is somewhat less than reliable. And the fact is that, although the focus of the book is consistently on SDSers and their reaction to the outside world (if she wants a general history of the 1960s, she'd better hie to the library for a different book), the whole

range of momentous events of the 1960s is in the book, from the missile crisis to Plei Ku to Charles Manson. 4) She complains that I allude "to far-reaching effects" of the New Left but that she finds them "hard to pin down," everything having vanished "into oblivion." Well, they are all there in the book (for brief summaries she might like to look in the index under "Effects," for 30 pages on the subject), but more important it turns out that they are there in Lessard herself: the whole last section of the article acknowledges "the highly visible contributions" of the New Left and she gives testimony to the effects in herself caused by New Leftists—"I know that I owe most of the lines of inquiry I have pursued in the years since that time [1968] directly to that small band."

Lastly, I want to make a brief comment on Lessard's treatment of the Columbia demonstrations, where she claims "to set the record straight." Her account is muddled and distorted, wrong both in a number of specifics—the kinds of people in Hamilton, what the votes were about, who left and why, SDS's prior role at Columbia—and in its general tone, which seems mostly to stem from a reaction to the silly way she herself behaved. I'd suggest that anyone who wants a version closer to the truth read either *SDS, The Battle for Morningside Heights* (Morrow, 1970), or the definitive close-up, *Up Against the Ivy Wall* (Atheneum, 1969).

For the future, might I suggest that Lessard try to avoid those two common dangers in her profession, of failing to read that which one presumes to attack, and failing to understand that which one presumes to interpret. Lest she become known permanently as the Lessard of two evils.

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Kirkpatrick Sale is the author of *SDS*.

#### *The author replies:*

I don't understand how Kirkpatrick Sale can claim it is presumptuous for a non-SDS-er to write about SDS. In his introduction Sale writes, "Though I was never a member of SDS, my interest in the organization stems from the fact that I was, like most people I know, considerably changed by the events and processes of the sixties which SDS helped to fashion." I cannot think of a better way of putting my own case. Evidently the element of presumption which distinguishes me from Sale is that my opinion differs from his.

The reference to Robert Kennedy should have been John Kennedy, a slip which must

have happened somewhere in the editorial-proofreading-printing process.

Sale is right: he does "mention" the expulsion of whites from Hamilton. But the sentence he quotes is the *only* direct reference. And the only background for this fleeting mention is in the sentence before, in which we learn, between dashes, that the early stages of the uprising included "—abortive marches around the campus, the occupation of one building by a black and white coalition, the holding hostage of a college dean—". The failure of a coalition between very serious white, middle-class radicals and black militants at the very beginning of the siege is in my view not only an event of significance in the history of SDS, but one which could reveal much about the inner thinking of the radicals, their strength, as well as their insecurity and their desire for revolutionary legitimacy. Instead of doing this, Sale tells us in another fleeting mention two pages later that despite the "independence" of the blacks, the coalition was a success and did indeed give the whites a sense of legitimacy. This is precisely the kind of glossing, the description of events as SDS wanted them to be—as opposed to what really happened—for which I criticized Sale. Instead of a real coalition, what the whites got was a fragile, very uneasy alliance from which, the blacks made very clear, they might break at any time. This yielded at best an equally fragile, uneasy, sense of legitimacy, generating, in my view, not confidence but a sense of insecurity which affected the course of events because it made the whites want to prove themselves to the aloof blacks.

Sale refers to the black movement in other parts of the book as well, it is true, but once again we learn from him what the official line was concerning the blacks, but not nearly enough about the real life relationship between the two movements and the psychological (as opposed to ideological) impact of the relationship on the whites.

The tone of Sale's letter surprised me. I had thought that tedious habits such as radical upsmanship (his reference to my "slide to liberalism") and in-ism (my presumption as an outsider) were no longer indulged in by the serious members of the now older New Left. But judging by that tone my guess is that Sale believes my criticisms of his work are motivated only by a desire to discredit SDS. I think he is the one that discredits that organization by so venomously guarding its myths. Personally, I think the true story is far more impressive.

# The Unions- How Much Can a Good Man Do

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by Curtis Seltzer

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Coal miners have often been romanticized in literature and journalism. There's a continuing fascination with miners, something about the spectre of black pits and grimy faces, of digging coal in dark dungeons "where the rain never falls and the sun never shines," of the "stooped wretches" who face the daily prospect of being cut, crippled, crushed, or blown apart. Miners' unions have a particular appeal and have been heralded by writers like Sinclair, Dreiser, and Dos Passos. Because of this tradition it is not surprising that Arnold Miller is the latest object of popular fancy. Miller, who defeated the dread Tony Boyle for the presidency of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in 1972, and his Miners for Democracy (MFD) have been lauded as revolutionaries by journals like *The Washington Post* and *The Atlantic*. In recent months there has been some gentle criticism by liberal writers, very cautious, very

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tentative. Perhaps it's too soon to demystify the heroes. Maybe it's unfair to judge the reformers against their self-imposed, publicly expressed standards, which far exceed those of most American trade unions. There is still the stuff of heroes in the UMWA's reform movement, make no mistake about that.

But the romantic vision of the UMWA confuses what has happened with what needs to happen. At this juncture Miller's reform movement is a reform movement still, nothing less and not too much more. The work of democratizing the internal management of the union is still in process, and the Miller reforms simply represent the lowest common denominator of trade union democracy.

The MFD reformers had several tasks before them when they assumed office in December, 1972. First, there was the job of imposing democratic procedures on the internal workings of the organization. The leadership's commitment to internal fair play has been remarkably consistent. The new